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ABSTRACT

Despite the large and growing numbers of adult women enrolled in college programs in this country today, there have been few attempts to identify and analyze the underlying psychosocial issues which propel women onto campuses as "nontraditional" students or the personal changes they experience as a result. This study examined the relationship between personal choice and the social-historical context of individual lives in women enrolled in a college program for returning women. The life history method was used with 15 returning college women ages 30-45. The life history method was chosen because the goal of the research was to collect individual "voices" which have been missed by traditional objective research. Thematic and lexical analysis revealed a varied group of themes. The need to differentiate self from others was often a predetermining factor in the decision to return to college. Feelings of support from and connectedness to others was a significant aspect of subjects' ability to persevere toward completion of their degrees. The women shared an increased sense of competence and personal power, as measured by their new ownership of knowledge. A love of learning, as well as the thrill of classroom achievement seemed to mark their academic careers. The process of sharing their thoughts, feelings, and experiences with the researcher resulted in mutual self-discovery and provided additional nourishment for the respondents' growing sense of empowerment. (ABL)

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Personal Development and the Pursuit of Higher Education: An Exploration of Interrelationships in the Growth of Self-Identity in Returning Women Students

Summary of Research in Progress

Objectives

Despite the large and growing numbers of adult women enrolled in college programs in this country today, there have been few attempts to identify and analyze the underlying psychosocial issues which propel women onto campuses as "non-traditional" students or the personal changes they experience as a result. Throughout the 1980's there has been a growing body of theory on female adolescent and adult development based on studies conducted by women researchers (Belenky, et al, 1986; Gilligan, 1982; Josselson, 1987). Their work has provided a new set of descriptors and models which makes it possible to examine the lives of women without sole comparison to men.

The relationship between personal choice and the social-historical context of individual lives is particularly marked in the women being studied. Respondents for this project are women presently enrolled in the Douglass College program for returning women students, originated by Dean Mary I. Bunting in 1958 to enable mature women who had previously left college to return and complete their bachelors' degrees. A phenomenological methodology was selected in order to allow the "voices" and individual issues of the women themselves to emerge. This report details the use of the life history method employed in the study and presents examples of preliminary analysis of data obtained from one respondent. In the final study the author will explore accounts of formal and informal learning experiences and significant relationships and life events, based on a set of life histories currently being gathered from a group of fifteen returning women students, ages 30-45.

Theoretical Framework

This study proceeds from an underlying assumption that change and research are interdependent. Although demographic research has provided a statistical description of the returning woman student, the authentic voice of the researched has not been heard. The theoretical framework follows a phenomenological approach, which links the method of research with practice and emerging theory. The line of inquiry in this type of descriptive approach is not guided by a model, or detailed theoretical outline. Rather, the sequence of research follows the progressive emergence of successively more specific information gained from the respondents themselves. The qualitative investigative paradigm thus begins with a philosophical need to describe and understand social phenomena and proceeds through methods which will allow impressions to emerge (Guba, 1978).

Method

The life history was the method of choice for this study because the goal of the research is the collection of individual "voices" which have been missed by traditional objective research. Further, the life history method reflects the interdisciplinary approach taken here in an effort to elucidate cultural context as well as individual life patterns. A life history method is particularly suited to answer questions about the meaning of change. It can reveal the changing meaning of an individual's life path as she moves through life events in an evolving historical culture. Moreover, the social context of life events can be seen as the backdrop for the conscious choices and priorities which individuals have exercised in their lives (Langness,1965; Plummer, 1983).

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The life history method provides the theoretical basis for the respondents to be the story-tellers of their own existences, with the images, themes, and issues raised by the women ultimately shaping the hypotheses . Guiding questions drawn from history, psychology, and sociology have directed the research on a path which will give most meaning to the responses related to education and choice:

1. What is the relationship between female adult developmental issues and the choice these women made to re-enter college for completion of a baccalaureate degree?

2. What role has formal education played in their lives?

a. How do they connect their formal education with the overall learning / knowing they have achieved in their lives?

b. How do formal education and learning through experience interplay with events and relationships in their lives?

3. How do the women view the role of choice in their lives, particularly with regard to personal decision-making and the pursuit of formal education?

4. Has the course of formal education as adults been itself meaningful to the women in influencing personal change?

Data Source

Collection of data has been based on the conversational interview approach, an ethnographic technique described by Mathiot (1979, 1982, 1983) and Penfield (1986). This is a nonstructured and open-ended technique combining self-disclosure with culturally responsive questions, which guide conversation with language cues that arise spontaneously during the interview. A general opening statement sets the tone for a "client-centered" conversation. Four principal elements insure that responses occur on the respondents' own terms. First, global questions are posed to increase "self-disclosure", as with, for example, the question, "*Can you tell me more about that?*" Second, everyday words or jargon used by the respondent, called cover terms or folk terms, are probed for special psychological or cultural meaning. Third, the interviewee is led to provide descriptors, or definitions of cover terms, as in the instance of the phrase *"a different place"*, which revealed the following descriptors: *"confident"*, *"better than"*, and *"having doors open that were previously closed"*. Fourth, an ethnographic summary, composed directly after the interview, provides a composite of the researcher's observations based on the respondent's own terms.

Results

Thematic and lexical analysis to date has revealed a varied group of themes. The need to differentiate self from others is often a predetermining factor in the decision to return to college. A sense of helplessness toward treatment from others or toward the vagaries of fate frequently characterizes adolescence and early adulthood. Feelings of support from and connectedness to others is a significant aspect of their ability to persevere toward completion of their degrees. The women universally share an increased sense of competence and personal power, as measured by their new ownership of knowledge. A love of learning, as well as the thrill of classroom achievement seems to mark their academic careers. The process of sharing their thoughts, feelings, and experiences with the researcher results in mutual self-discovery and provides additional nourishment for the respondents' growing sense of empowerment.

Research Implications

This study has been designed to examine the interrelationships between individual women's lives and the cultural backdrop which helped shape their choices, including the choice to pursue higher education as adults and how that education then made other choices possible. The interdependence of research and practice is exemplified by the phenomenological assumptions underlying this work: (1) the belief that there is no neutral research; (2) a commitment to use research for change (*praxis*) in reciprocal shaping of theory and practice; (3) the idea that the role of the researcher is interactive, and that it may be a legitimate part of research to enter the world of the "researched" in order to achieve understanding; and (4) the belief that

knowledge is based on social construction. By allowing the cultural prescriptives felt by women to emerge from the process of hearing their voices, the complicated intertwining of societal norms, life events and relationships, and opportunity for individual choice, particularly with regard to higher education, will be elucidated.

Educational Importance of the Study

The study of returning women students is historical in the sense that returning women students, as a social phenomenon, were first identified with large numbers of female college drop-outs in the 1950s. However, while programs to return capable women to college may have arisen within a specific historical period, there is still a need for such programs. An ambivalent social climate, in which socialization continues to emphasize educational, work, and family roles that are gender-related, produces confusion borne of cultural contradictions. The study of returning women students offers a perspective on the broader issue of women and achievement in American higher education. It is critical to increase our understanding of the ways in which societal influence acts, not only from gender-related definitions of achievement, but also in the constriction for women of choice itself.

WORKING WITH A LIFE HISTORY METHOD:
USING THE CONVERSATIONAL INTERVIEW TECHNIQUE TO COLLECT DATA

DEFINITION OF LIFE HISTORY METHOD:

Method by which researcher obtains verbal autobiographical account from a respondent, through the use of nonstructured interview(s). In most cases a lengthy initial interview is followed by shorter repeat sessions in order to provide additional information or to provide checks on information previously obtained.

USES OF LIFE HISTORY METHOD:

1. Answers questions about the meaning of change.
    a. Can reveal the changing meaning of an individual's life path as she/he moves through life events in an evolving historical culture.
    b. Provides dual focus on historical change, moving between the changing biographical history of the person and the social context of her or his life path.
2. Identifies conscious choices and priorities which individuals may have exercised in their lives.

ADVANTAGES OF LIFE HISTORY METHOD:

1. Avoids assumptions of uniform demographic stages over the life span.
2. Suitability for providing information and insight into aspects of values, socialization, and role analysis.
3. Relevance to research on women and other groups who fall outside the previously normed.
    a. May provide personal data on phenomenon of "anticipatory socialization" and occurrence of nonnormative life events.
    b. Allows individuals to reveal the significant symbols and issues of their lives in their own "voices" and terminology.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS :

1. Nonstructured and open-ended.
2. Employs culturally responsive questions, derived from language cues that arise spontaneously from an interview.
3. General opening statement: *"I am trying to learn more about why an adult woman returns to college and what that means to her in the context of her life; also, how women come to think of themselves as knowers. You can help me by sharing your experiences."*
4. Several general eliciting questions :
    "Who or what has been influential in your returning to college?"
    "How do you go about understanding new things?"
    "As you look back, what do you think were the most powerful or significant experiences of your life?"

ELICITING ROUTINE EVENTS/LIFE EXPERIENCES :

1. RECALL PAST EVENT: Probe for a general description and details of familiar events and personal life experiences. Use questions such as:
    Who? Who is being described and how are they described by respondent.
    Why? What are the motivations for actions, both the respondent's and others'.
    Where? How is the setting described.
    What occurs? and in *what order?* (sequence)
    How is it accomplished? (What kind of communication -- verbal, non-verbal, written)
    How often? (frequency)
    How did it feel? What are the feelings of the respondent and others.

2. RECALL A SPECIFIC EVENT: Ask respondent to put herself in a past event .
"Think back to the day you decided to reapply to college. Can you tell me about that? How did it feel?"

3. RECONSTRUCT A TYPICAL DAY : Ask respondent to relive a typical day in her life before she returned to college/since she returned to college
"Tell me about what it was like for you when...."

4. RECONSTRUCT PHYSICAL SETTING/APPEARANCE: Ask respondent to reconstruct the physical appearance of familiar things.
"Can you physically describe what a 'student' looks like?"
"What was that room like that you remember?"

5. RECONSTRUCT PAST CONVERSATIONS: Ask respondent to reconstruct parts of conversations which are relevant to significant past experiences.
"What did your mother say after that?"
"How did you respond to what they said?"

6. USE PROPS PERSONALLY MEANINGFUL TO RESPONDENT: Conversation with respondent can center around personal meaning of these -- photographs, children's drawings, coffee mugs, a diary or journal she keeps, etc

7. HYPOTHETICAL SITUATION: Suggest an imaginary but realistic situation which would be relevant to the respondent.
"Imagine walking into a classroom your last semester at Douglass. What do you think your feelings will be like?"

8. COMPARISONS/CONTRASTS: Ask respondent to explain by comparing to something else previously mentioned in her experience, such as ' professors' in college now vs. 'professors' in her past college experience; ' students' now vs. ' students' when she first started college.

USE OF FOLK TERMS OR COVER TERMS :

1. DEFINITION: Everyday words or jargon that mean something specific to the respondent because of special life meaning (psychological or cultural, for instance). Example: the term '*other people*'.

2. IMPORTANT: Folk terms are important because they are linguistic cues that provide an opening into the respondent's world. During the conversation, identify terms/phrases/labels which the respondent uses frequently. Request a FOLK DEFINITION by asking for more information.
"Can you tell me what you mean by 'other people'? Can you tell me more about them?"

UTILIZING RESPONDENT'S RESPONSES :

1. CLARIFY AMBIGUITY AND FOLK TERMS:
Restate respondent's statement or your question.
Reformulate your question.
Offer a paraphrase of respondent's question.
Offer a definition of respondent's statement.
Offer a summary of respondent's statements.
Offer comparison /contrast of respondent's statements.

2. OBTAIN FOLK ESTIMATES:
For example, with regard to described events, how typical were they, or routine, ordinary, atypical.

3. ELICIT MORE INFORMATION:

Ask for elaboration:
-Silence.
-Neutral verbal feedback cues, e.g. "uh-huh." /"Oh, I see." /"Really..." /I didn't know that."
-"Can you tell me more about...?"
-Probe for details.

Ask for an example or instance:
-When respondent used variation of term 'feeling connected' several times, researcher asked for specific example.

Ask for emotions, feelings, and motivations of participants:
-Ask directly. Probe for more detail.
-Use mirror statements to elicit deeper feelings.

Ask for a definition:
-"Can you tell me what you mean by...?"
-"What does 'search' mean? What does that word mean to you?"

Ask for comparisons and contrasts:
-"What do you find most different about yourself as a learner now from yourself as a learner when you started college for the first time?"

Ask for a description:
-"Can you describe the 'box' you were in?"

CODING:

1. TRANSCRIBE ALL ORAL MATERIAL INTO TYPED TRANSCRIPT:
Use a consistent method to differentiate between Researcher and Respondent, such as having all Researcher statements and questions typed in upper case and all Respondent statements, questions, and responses typed in lower case.

2. PREPARE TRANSCRIPT FOR CODING:
Letter and number each of the Researcher's statements. For example, the Researcher's initiating statement can be marked "Q1" in the left-hand column. The respondent's response can then be known by a letter or number assigned to her, along with the number of the text. Respondent "A"'s response to Q1 will then be identified as A-1, Respondent "1"'s response to Q1 as 1-1, etc.
All utterances should be coded, even "Uh-huhs".

3. DEVELOP CODING CATEGORIES:
Read through the transcript and start by listing commonly used words and phrases (folk terms) and every theme, concept, interpretation, definition, and conversation topic.
Review the list for overlap and combine categories as needed.
Assign each category a workable title and develop a system of file cards, notebook, or computer filing system to receive entries.

4. CODE ALL THE DATA:
Code the transcript according to the categories developed, by circling and underlining the relevant words and sections and writing the name of the category in the margin.
Code both positive and negative aspects of all categories. Analysis will make use of all definitions, even those expressed in negative terms, such as what was not an expectation for a woman as she was growing up.

Refine the coding scheme as needed. Add, collapse, expand, and redefine categories to increase clarity. IMPORTANT : Make the codes fit the data and not vice versa.

Where statements fit more than one category, make sure that you note that.

5. SORT THE DATA INTO CODING CATEGORIES :

Simply sort the data according to each category. One set of notes or cards or printout may be literally cut up and placed into category folders, but one complete set should be kept intact since context is important in final analysis.

6. REVIEW DATA :

See what data have been left out of the analysis and include where appropriate.

Develop new categories as needed.

It is not necessary to include all data. Do not force data into a framework they do not fit.

7. REFINE THE ANALYSIS :

Accommodate the data rather than your ideas. Define terms within the context of the respondent's world and her voice. Discard themes and definitions that do not fit.

DISCOVERY AND INSIGHT :

Analysis will flow from (1) identification of topics (topical analysis); (2) folk terms and events (lexical analysis); (3) folk definitions ; and (4) emerging themes. Data analysis is an ongoing process, often with data collection and analysis proceeding simultaneously.

Insight and intuition, combined with careful examination of the data, are necessary for recognition of patterns and themes. Strategies for working with the data are as follows:

1. LOOK FOR EMERGING THEMES AND CONSTRUCT CLASSIFICATION SCHEMES.

Patterns in conversation topics, folk terms, and feelings will begin to stand out . Sometimes themes will emerge out of definitional relationships:

RELATIONSHIP	FORM	EXAMPLE
Strict inclusion	X is a kind of Y	An excellent student (is a kind of) student.
Spatial	X is a place in Y	The Bunting Lounge (is a place in) the Douglass College Center.
Cause-effect	X is a result of Y	Being more serious (is a result of) being older.
Rationale	X is a reason for for doing Y	My children being in school now (is a reason for) going back to college.
Location-for-action	X is a place for doing Y	The Bunting Lounge(is a place for) relax ing and talking with women my own age.
Function	X is used for Y	Deans and counselors (are used for) advice.
Means-end	X is a way to do Y	Obtaining my college degree (is a way to) achieve security and satisfaction.
Sequence	X is a step in Y	Each semester (is a step in) earning my B.A.
Attribution	X is an attribution of Y	Perseverance (is an attribute of) the successful mature woman student.

2. READ AND REREAD DATA .

3. TRACK THEMES, INTERPRETATIONS, IDEAS.

Note for potential usefulness.

4. DEVELOP CONCEPTS AND THEORETICAL EXPLANATIONS.

Move the research from description to interpretation and theory. Look for *concrete concepts*, or concepts from respondents which are their own ideas and experiences expressed in their own words or phrases (folk terms).

Look for *unifying concepts* that underlie and unite themes within one respondents and then from one respondent to another. Compare statements, events, folk definitions.

Also look for underlying similarities between themes for any linkages that may exist.

Develop a *story-line* which may guide the analysis, but never force the data into a framework which does not fit.

ISSUES OF VALIDITY :

1. It is necessary to develop *self-corrective* techniques that check data credibility and minimize personal bias.

2. *Triangulation* is critical: the Researcher should analyze for counterpatterns as well as convergence in order to provide credibility (Lather).

3. *Construct validity* must be accounted for. The research data themselves must yield the theory-building, and any a priori theory must be supported by the logic of the data. The Researcher must determine whether the theoretical constructs are actually occurring or whether they are inventions of her own perspective.

4. *Face validity* is provided by sharing folk terms and definitions, emerging themes and analysis with a respondent or subgroup of respondents to check for *resonance*, or a feeling of recognition. Care must be taken to avoid the possible false consciousness of respondents (Lather).

EXAMPLES OF CODING FOLK DEFINITIONS:

"SUPPORT":

- "I have an extremely supportive husband..." 2-1(Respondent #2-Question 1).
- people being helpful, e.g. "If I called up there (Douglass) it didn't matter what the question was." 2-2
- when people extended themselves. 2-3
- located in Bunting lounge. 2-3
- "To talk to people, yeah." 2-4
- "get your perspective back which is really helpful" 2-4
- three kinds -- the college, administration, husband. 2-4
- "does confirm that I am okay to myself" 2-5
- not "an atmosphere where people were not real considerate of the other person" 2-5
- not "we were told what to do, we had to do it ... um . .. and there wasn't a real emphasis on what you could do as an individual" 2-5

"CONFIDENCE":

- "I'm lesslikely now to take things just as they are" 2-10
- "I am more likely now to question why we are doing things this way" 2-10
- I am more likely to analyze things further" 2-10
- "I am aware of the way that I think" 2-10
- to take a problem to completion ... "I had a problem with that before" 2-10
- laughs a lot less when she talks 2-10
- "I am not going to let people walk on me which is what I might have done before" 2--10
- "I have a sense that I am in a 'different place'...and "I feel that my place has been elevated" 2-10

"A DIFFERENT PLACE":

* "above a lot of people" 2-11
* "more secure" 2-11
* "credible" 2-11
* "believable place" 2-11
* "I can conquer it" (the world) 2-11
* "I am not going to let anybody get in my way" 2-11
* "...when something comes up I am not worried ... because I can handle it" 2-11

EMERGING THEMES -- RESPONDENT #1:

1. Spacial definitions: size, boundaries, lines, place, referenced by size, etc.
2. Growing assertiveness/confidence
3. Support
4. Redefinition of self
5. Choice
6. Time
7. Knowledge
8. Responsibility

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